SPECIAL FEATURE
RACHEL BAIL

AUGUST 21, 1978

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI PREMIERES IN WASHINGTON

ANNCR: THE PASSION AND GRANDEUR OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE HAS HIT THE STAGE AT WASHINGTON'S WOLF TRAP FARM PARK FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS -- AND, ACCORDING TO VOA'S RACHAEL BAIL, THE NEW OPERA, "THE DUCHESS OF MALFI," WHICH RECREATES THIS ERA, HAS BEEN ENTHUSIASTICALLY RECEIVED BYTHE CRITICS AND THE AUDIENCES. HERE IS HER REVIEW.

VOICE: THE "DUCHESS OF MALFI" -- COMPOSER STEPHEN BURTON'S NEW OPERA BASED ON A FAMED AND BLOODY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH PLAY -- IS INDEED THE STUFF THAT OPERA IS MADE OF. IT HAS EVERYTHING -- FROM AN ELECTRIC SCORE THAT EFFECTIVELY PROVIDES THE MUSIC TO GO WITH THE EMOTIONS OF LOVE AND REVENGE THAT PERVADE THE OPERA TO EXCELLENT SETS AND COSTUMES THAT BEAUTIFULLY RECREATE THE MOOD OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE.

THE "DUCHESS OF MALFI" IS THE TRAGIC AND BRUTAL STORY OF A BEAUTIFUL WIDOW, WHO IS URGED BY HER BROTHERS -- A CARDINAL AND THE DUKE FERDINAND -- TO MARRY A MAN SHE DOES NOT LOVE. IN THE END, SHE IS MURDERED BY THE CARDINAL BECAUSE SHE HAS TAKEN HER STEWARD AS A LOVER AND BORNE HIM A CHILD.

ROBERTA PALMER -- WHO SANG THE ROLE OF THE DUCHESS -- IS NOT ONLY A GOOD SINGER BUT ALSO A GOOD ACTRESS -- AND SHE GAVE THE ROLE BOTH PASSION AND PATHOS. THERE ARE SCENES THROUGHOUT THE OPERA THAT EFFECTIVELY CONTRAST WITH EACH OTHER -- SUCH AS THOSE IN THE FIRST ACT WHEN THE DUCHESS

VOICE: (CONT) AND THE STEWARD -- ANTONIO -- FIRST DECLARE THEIR LOVE AND WHERE THE DUCHESS DEFIES HER BROTHER'S PLANS FOR HER MARRIAGE.

THE ROLE OF ANTONIO WAS SUNG BY NEIL ROSENSHEIN, WHO HAS A FINE TENOR VOICE. THE OTHERS IN THE CAST ALL DID AN EXCELLENT JOB WILLIAM DANSBY, AS THE VILLIAN WHO SEES THE EVIL OF HIS WAYS, STEPHEN DICKSON, AS DUKE FERDINAND, JUDITH CHRISTIAN, AS THE DUCHESS' ATTENDANT, AND ESPECIALLY WILLIAM WILDERMANN AS THE CARDINAL.

THE OPERA, WHICH IS FULL OF HIGH MOMENTS OF DRAMA, BUILDS TO ESPECIALLY EFFECTIVE ENDING -- WITH THE DANCING OF THE MADMEN, INCLUDING THE DUCHESS' BROTHER, FERDINAND, AROUND THE DOOMED WOMAN, HER BABY AND HER COMPANION. THE FINALE -- WHEN THE TWO WOMEN AND THE BABY ARE KILLED BY THE CARDINAL'S MEN AND THE CHURCHMAN IS THEN MURDERED BY HIS HENCHMAN -- IS MARVELOUSLY CHILLING.

THE LIBRETTIST -- CHRISTOPHER KEENE -- WHO DID AN EXCELLENT JOB OF TURNING JOHN WEBSTER'S PLAY INTO AN OPERA -- ALSO CONDUCTED THE PERFORMANCES AT WOLF TRAP, ONE OF THE MOST SATISFYING PERFORMANCES OF THIS SEASON.

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